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New Light on the Satpanthi Imamshahis of Pirana

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New Light on the Satpanthi Imamshahis of Pirana

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Introduction

The Imamshahi sect, also known as the Satpanth ('path' or 'sect' of Truth), which forms the subject of this paper is, on the face of it, a comparatively minor Indian sect comprising about one million followers, mostly concentrated in the state of Gujarat and, to a lesser extent, in neighbouring Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. But though numerically quite small by Indian standards, the Satpanthis have an unusual historical identity, which in effect makes them into a far more significant and intriguing subject of research than their small numbers would otherwise suggest.[1]

Much of the special fascination which today attaches to the Satpanthis derives from the fact that at a time when Hindus and Muslims in South Asia have become politically polarised, the traditionalist Satpanth still attempts, in its own peculiar, complex fashion, to bridge that great divide. Thus, even though the sect is now coming under intense pressure from exponents of Hindutva to identify itself with reformed Brahminical Hinduism—as in the past it has been similarly threatened by some Sunnni Muslims who reject shrine worship and pose as guardians of Islamic orthodoxy—approximately 85 percent of the sect's members class themselves as caste Hindus, while the remaining 15 percent register themselves in the census as Muslims.[2]

[1] Dominique-Sila Khan and Zawahir Moir, 'Coexistence and Communalism: The Shrine of Pirana in Gujarat', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol.XXII, Special Issue (1999), pp.133–54.
[2] *Ibid.*

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The history and current evolution of the Imamshahi Satpanth is closely linked to the shaping of religious identities in South Asia.

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Essentially what unites the Satpanth's different followers is their common devotion to a fifteenth-century Muslim saint known as Pir Imam Shah, and to a lesser extent to his son Sayyid Nur Muhammad Shah, whose family *dargah* or shrine is situated at Pirana some 16 kilometres from Ahmedabad. According to traditional Imamshahi or Pirana Satpanthi theology, these two personages embody a dual Hindu/Islamic identity, on the one hand as avatars of Indra and Vishnu respectively and, on the other hand, as imam-like Sufi *sayyid*s/*pir*s directly descended from the first Imam Ali. However, it should be stressed that the Satpanthis themselves are not always clear about the exact Hindu divine correlates of each figure, or of their own precise position within the complex genealogies of Islamic *sayyid*s, *pir*s and imams. Be that as it may, Imam Shah's followers in practice share a certain number of beliefs and practices which characterise the Imamshahi Satpanth as a distinct religious tradition. It may not be out of place to notice here that the composite or 'liminal' nature of the sect, as well as the dual identity of its key religious figures, has also characterised, in the past, the Nizari Ismaili tradition as a whole.[3]

At least until recently—since a process of Hinduisation has been set afoot aimed at suppressing Islamic references—most Satpanthis, whether outwardly professing Hindu or Muslim identities, were content to express their devotion to Imam Shah and the Satpanth through various common rituals, prayers, singing of devotional hymns known as *ginan*s, and recitation of the mantra 'Pirshah', all of which combined Hindu and Islamic elements. The same blend is also reflected in the structures and organisations spawned by the several branches of the Satpanth (for it has to be said that it is now divided into several such branches). In 1939—following a long court case—a trust was created to manage the main shrine. It is still in operation. The management committee is composed of representatives of the different constituents of the sect, namely three *sayyid*s claiming descent from Imam Shah, and seven followers or *murid*s drawn currently from the caste of Kacchi Kanbis, Patels or Patidars (an agricultural community). But all committee members act together co-operatively under the chairmanship of the shrine's chief 'guru' and administrator known as the *kaka* (from the Persian for servant).[4] Traditionally

[3] Azim Nanji, *The Nizari Ismaili Tradition in the Indo/Pakistan Subcontinent* (Delmar, N.Y.: Caravan Books, 1979).

[4] See Khan and Moir, 'Coexistence and Communalism: The Shrine of Pirana in Gujarat', pp.141–2. In the Imamshahi tradition a distinction is made between the *gaddivala* and the *bagvavala kaka*: the latter has a minor role, whereas the former acts as the caretaker of the shrine and the head of the community of *murid*s.

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endowed with a dual religious identity, the *kaka* nowadays registers in the census as a Hindu.[5]

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Although it is not clear which section of the Patidar caste (Karwa or Lewa) was the first to attach itself to Imam Shah,[6] a number of pastoralists and peasant groups from the countryside districts of Gujarat and other places now pay allegiance to him. Some pay one tenth of their earnings to the *kaka* who is supposed to give it to his *pir*, a *sayyid* whom he recognises as a supreme authority, and others bring offerings and gifts for various religious rituals. Nevertheless from the beginning these groups remained outside the purview of local state knowledge and patronage. From the surviving compositions of Imam Shah and a few other sources,[7] it appears that part of the collected funds were sent abroad but that much was used to maintain the shrine and its set-up.

In this paper we seek to illuminate certain aspects of Satpanth history with the aid of some new sources together with certain older materials that can still throw fresh light on the movement. In particular we examine the sect's origin and its relationship to its parent body—a relationship that underlies the subsequent development of the Satpanth and helps to explain its gradual evolution into a cult having peculiar problems of identity.

In 1999 and again in early 2000 we spent some time in Pirana where we met numerous *sayyid*s during the *urs* (death anniversary) ceremony of Imam Shah. They had come to perform rituals, to pray, and generally to offer devotion to Imam Shah. We were given permission to stay in the community guesthouse by the Hindu *kaka*—a leader of the principal branch—and were allowed to listen to their hymns called *ginan*s (which contain the teachings of Imam Shah) and to participate in the holy water ceremony. The *kaka* also permitted us to interview the *mukhi*s (chiefs) and other followers from various centres in Gujarat. And we were able to buy some special publications consisting of *ginan*s mostly attributed to Imam Shah and his son.

[5] See Dominique-Sila Khan, 'Liminality and Legality: A Contemporary Debate among the Imamshahis of Gujarat', in Ahmad Imtiaz and Reifeld Helmut (eds), *Lived Islam in South Asia* (Delhi: Social Science Press, 2004), pp.209–32. Although India is a democratic and secular state, religious identities are legally defined as personal law is different for each major community. See Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron (eds), *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity* (New Delhi: Sage, 1995).

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[6] Patidars (often simply called Patels), previously known as Kanbis, are an agricultural community.

[7] Khayr K. Herati, *Tasnifat* (ed. W. Ivanow) (Tehran 1961), pp.54, 60.

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Later on we realised that to understand the tensions within the community it was also necessary to visit Kacch, and this exploration was duly undertaken in 2000. There we encountered *sayyid*s who had abandoned the Satpanth in favour of the Swami Narayan sect or set up separate groups influenced by the Sanatan Dharm movement or the cult of Lakshminarayan. Intense religious debates have taken place at Kacch between various Satpanthi followers of the Patidar caste now registered as Hindus. Some of the outcomes of these proceedings have been published whilst some remain in manuscript form. Fortunately, a few of the modern followers we met allowed us to look at some of this unpublished literature. Also during our trip to Gujarat we discovered numerous court cases affecting the Imamshahis and were able to collect oral testimony and various records from centres in Ahmedabad such as the B.J. Institute and the Pir Muhammad Shah Library. The Forbes Saba and other libraries were also useful. And later, after returning to Europe, we were able to re-examine a number of older source materials, such as James Forbes' *Oriental Memoirs* which contains a description of his visit to the Pirana shrine in 1781, his namesake Alexander Forbes' *Ras Mala* (1874) compiled with the help of the Gujarati poet Dalpatram Daya, and a copy of the Gujarati journal *Buddhi Prakash* (edited by Dalpatram Daya) from 1871, which has a long article by a *kaka* of Pirana giving useful data on the history of the sect and its branches. In addition we found interesting data in the reports of another British officer, Henry Briggs, whose interviews with the *sayyid*s of Pirana in the 1840s are reproduced in his book *The Cities of Gujarashtra* (1849).

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However, the most important of all the sources we turned up in London are perhaps the Khojki *ginan* manuscripts and printed texts of the Nizari Ismailis, which can be usefully compared with the printed versions of the same basic texts produced by the Satpanthis.

Origin and Fragmentation (1500–1900)

The Mission of Imam Shah and Nur Muhammad Shah

What is the origin of this unusual and rather mysterious sect, which for want of a more precise term we may describe as outwardly 'liminal' and highly secretive. It has long been recognised by historians[8] that the Imamshahi Satpanth has its historical roots in the missionary activities of the Shia

[8] J.M. Campbell (ed.), *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, Vol.IX, Part II: *Gujarat Population: Musalmans and Parsis* (Bombay, 1896). See also W. Ivanow, 'The Sect of Imam Shah in Gujarat', in *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol.XII (1936), pp.19–70; and Sachedina Nanjiani, *Khoja Vrttant* (Ahmedabad, 1892).

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Ismaili Nizari preachers (*pir*s)[9] who, under the loose direction of their imams in Iran, were active in preaching an acculturated form of their faith, known as the Satpanth, amongst local populations across northern India from the eleventh/twelfth centuries onwards. In particular, the Nizari *pir*s are credited with having adopted several bold initiatives (such as largely borrowing from indigenous traditions and rituals),[10] clear traces of which still survive in the practices and religious texts of Imam Shah and his son Nur Muhammad Shah.[11]

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For instance, in the vernacular *ginan*s attributed to the Nizari *pir*s—manuscript and printed versions of which are held by both the Ismaili Nizaris and the Imamshahis—injunctions enjoining devotion to the imams as spiritual guides, the payment of tithes, and other more esoteric values associated with the Ismaili Nizari form of Islam, are subtly combined with a wide range of local Indian concepts and practices, with the imam himself being identified with Kalki, the tenth avatar of Vishnu—renamed 'Nikalank' (Sanskrit *nishkalanki*, the immaculate one)[12]—and the *pir*s with Brahma. The Nizari *pir*s also showed a general readiness to allow their followers to retain their caste status and customs (for instance for marriages and burials), and strongly advised them to resort to the traditional Shia practice of *taqiyya* (concealing one's true faith) in circumstances in which they might otherwise be threatened with persecution by local rulers. Underlying all these strategies and accommodations lay the deep conviction that the Satpanth represented the completion of Hinduism just as the Islamic revelation had earlier 'completed' Judaism and Christianity—which in a somewhat more complex way still informs the traditional philosophy of the Imamshahi Satpanthis.[13]

Taqiyya

As regards the original identities of Imam Shah (died c.1513) and his son Nur Muhammad Shah (died c.1533), Nizari accounts, generally supported by modern research, make it historically quite certain that both these figures

[9] Farhad Datary, *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge/Delhi: Cambridge University Press/ Munshiram Manoharlal, 1990), p.44.
[10] D.N. Maclean, *Religion and Society in Arab Sind* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989), pp.148–53.
[11] N.R.L. Contractor, *Pirana Satpanth ni Pol Ane Satya no Prakash* (Ahmedabad: author's publication, 1926), pp.172–492.
[12] The word *nishkalanki* (spotless) exclusively referring to the formless God and not any avatar (among others in the Nath yogi tradition) has been used by the Ismailis as an Indic equivalent of the adjective *masum* (pure, immaculate) as an attribute of the imam. Therefore the concept of '*nishkalanki* avatar' is a creation of the Nizari missionaries. See Dominique-Sila Khan, 'The Coming of Nikalank Avatar: A Messianic Theme in Some Sectarian Traditions of North-Western India', in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Vol.25, no.4 (1997), pp.401–26.
[13] Gulshan Khakee, 'The "Das Avatara" of Satpanthi Ismailis and Imam Shahis of Indo-Pakistan', unpublished PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 1972, pp.13–17.

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actually descended from the central line of *pir*s who had originally developed the Indian Nizari Satpanth. In particular, Nizari tradition clearly identifies Imam Shah as the eighteenth son of one of their last leading *pir*s, Hasan Kabiruddin of Ucch near Multan (died c.1470), who incidentally is also known to have had close Suhravardi Sufi links.[14]

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The traditional account of Imam Shah's life then runs as follows. After apparently being passed over for succession to the Nizari pirship (the pirship itself being wound up and re-organised by the imam a few years later), he is said to have travelled widely, firstly in Iran in order to visit the Imam (as described in his *ginan* 'Janatpuri'), and later across northern India, arriving finally at Gujarat, then ruled by the Sunni chief Mahmud Begra (died 1511). Sultan Begra became his patron and gave him a grant of land at Pirana; and there he gradually built up a following amongst communities belonging to the Kanbi agricultural caste who were apparently greatly impressed by his miracles and his powerful sermons about the living Imam who would come to India in the form of Nikalank. As his band of disciples grew, Imam Shah organised them into a number of *gaddi*s (seats), each of which had a *kaka* or headman responsible for religious instruction and the collection of religious dues.[15]

According to one tradition, Imam Shah married the daughter of a local Sufi saint, Muhammad Bukhari of the Suhravardi order.[16] It is also claimed that Imam Shah married the daughter of Sultan Hasan Afghani, a famous Sufi saint (though her grave does not appear to be at Pirana).[17] Several of his sons died at a young age and only one, Nur Muhammad Shah, and a daughter, survived him.[18]

In this account of Imam Shah's life, the Nizari tradition is broadly in agreement with what the Satpanthis record about his life. However by the twentieth century, the latter were no longer prepared to accept the Nizaris' contention that he was just an 'ordinary' Nizari missionary, not even a *pir* let alone head of the mission. For modern Imamshahi Satpanthis, he is the

[14] The city of Multan and the nearby city of Ucch have been alternatively the centres of the Nizari Ismaili mission (*dawa*). See A.H. Dihlavi, *Akhabarul Akhyar* (Delhi, 1891), pp.272–80.
[15] Motichand Tarachand, 'Pirana Vise', in D. Daya (ed.), *Buddhi Prakash* (Ahmedabad, 1871), pp.272–80.
[16] Nanjiani, *Khoja Vrttant*, p.216.
[17] S. Sadruddin Dargahvala, *Tavarikh-e Pir*, Vols. I and II (Navasari: author's publication, [1914], rev. ed. 1935), p.121.
[18] In his book published in 1926, Imam Shah's former follower Narayan Ramji Limbani 'Contractor' provides details of various tombs in which a number of children are buried. See Contractor, *Pirana Satpanth*, pp.146–8.

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real and independent founder of their faith, distinguished by an elevated and complex spiritual identity as *pir*, Sufi saint and divine avatar of Indra. At the same time they hold, somewhat inconsistently, that the line of *pir*s from which Imam Shah descended were not actually appointed by the Nizari imams; and that the Nizari Imam himself in the fifteenth century prophesied to both Hasan Kabiruddin and Imam Shah that the imamate would be mysteriously transferred from his own descendants in Iran to the descendants of Pir Hasan in India—a notion that is of course totally inconceivable to the Nizaris of the main branch.[19] Similarly, Nizaris and Imamshahis hold completely irreconcilable beliefs about the ultimate religious identity of Imam Shah's son Nur Muhammad Shah, the former seeing him only as an important Nizari *sayyid* missionary, the latter according him the special status of imam/Vishnu avatar (following their previously-described belief about the transfer of the imamate).[20]

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But leaving aside these differing views about the religious identity of Nur Muhammad Shah, it may be said that both communities broadly share a common tradition concerning many—if not all—of the events in his life. He is generally believed to have taken over responsibility for the nascent community centred on Pirana after his father's death (c.1513); to have gone on to attract more followers to the Satpanth; to have composed several major *ginans* (whether one or three is a matter of dispute);[21] and to have contracted a marriage to the daughter of Sultan Mahmud Begra, and two daughters of a Hindu Ahir leader in Bhavnagar.[22] It also seems likely that, at least during his youth, he mingled freely in the circle of Sufi poets which grew up under the ruler's patronage, traces of that vein of mystical thought being reflected in some of the *ginan*s attributed to him. Among the Pirana community, however, it is said that the shrine was built by his father and that Nur Muhammad Shah's relations with the ruler did not bring any recognition or patronage for the shrine during his lifetime. Finally, Nur Muhammad Shah is remembered for establishing the position of chief *kaka*. Holders of this office became responsible for managing and distributing the religious dues collected from the Imam's followers and for maintaining the shrine of Imam Shah in which he was later buried.

[19] Ivanow, 'The Sect of Imam Shah in Gujarat', p.44.
[20] Ahmad Ali Khaki, *Moti Satya Veni* (Ahmedabad: author's publication, rpr. 1971), p.27.
[21] Nur Muhammad Shah is credited with a work in Persian entitled *Tarikhe Muhammadiyah*. See Ivanow, 'The Sect of Imam Shah in Gujarat', p.24.
[22] Ahirs belonged to a pastoral community of rather low status in the Brahminical hierarchy. They now claim a higher status as the descendants of Krishna's adoptive family and call themselves 'Yadavs'.

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More precise and apparently accurate historical accounts generated by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers of Nizari origin[23] trace Nur Muhammad Shah's relations with the Nizari authorities to the north. Yet these accounts, tentatively followed by some later scholars such as Ivanow, have generated fresh controversy. Using an unspecified source, Nanjiani claims that Nur Muhammad Shah entered on an extraordinary collision course with the Nizari authorities by composing a heterodox verse in his *ginan* 'Sataveni',[24] which led to his excommunication by the imams in Iran. Another later writer concludes that Nur Muhammad Shah went as far as claiming that he himself was the Imam.[25] On the face of it such accounts, if substantiated, would offer an historical explanation of the origins of the Pirana Satpanthis' secession from the parent body which in a very loose sense would also fit with the Pirana belief that 'their' Satpanth is a separate faith inaugurated by Imam Shah and his son. Unfortunately it seems unlikely that they will be substantiated.[26] Moreover, on preliminary inspection the contents of the manuscript and printed versions of the *ginan*s of both Imam Shah and Nur Muhammad Shah show no clear thematic signs of any rift with the Nizari imams, nor any substantial departure from standard Ismaili teachings. Significantly the few isolated passages in published recensions of the *ginan* that ascribe a special spiritual status to Nur Muhammad Shah are not found in the manuscript version.[27]

Assumption of Sufi identity = Taqiyya

Finally, before leaving Imam Shah and his son, and moving forward to survey the later development of the Imamshahi sect, it is necessary to bring out the significance of one other aspect of their historical identities, namely their Sufi links which seem to have played a very important part in enabling them to effect a successful entry into the Sunni court of Sultan Mahmud Begra and establish their mission in Gujarat. As indicated earlier, the assumption of a Sufi identity had been a common *taqiyya* practice of the earlier Nizari missionaries. More specifically, we also know that in the time of Imam Shah's father, Pir Hasan Kabiruddin, the Nizari missionaries had come under strong pressure from powerful Sufi groups in Ucch and Multan to adopt a more orthodox stance, and that Pir Hasan himself seems to have actually joined the Suhravardi order. Add to this the similar advice then being given to their followers by the

[23] Nanjiani, *Khoja Vrttant*, p.228.
[24] *Ibid.* The canto of the *ginan* is given as 23.
[25] Ivanow, 'The Sect of Imam Shah in Gujarat', p.43; and A.J. Chunara, *Noorum-Mubin* (Bombay: 1961), p.357.
[26] See Malfuzate Mahdi Sahib quoted in Ivanow, 'The Sect of Imam Shah in Gujarat', p.24.
[27] See Khakee, 'The "Das Avatara" of Satpanthi Ismailis', in which Nur Muhammad Shah's descendants appear in the version of the *ginan* 'Das Avatara' attributed to Imam Shah. Such details appear to be later interpolations.

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Nizari imams[28] to appear outwardly more cautious, and we can begin to see more clearly how Imam Shah and his son might have projected themselves at the court of Mahmud Begra, whilst apparently moving successfully among the eminent Sufis of Gujarat.

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At the same time the issue of the Sufi-like identities evidently assumed by Imam Shah and his son to facilitate their mission is a complex one. For example, given the kind of court contacts implied in the traditional narratives of his life, it is not unlikely that Nur Muhammad Shah would have adopted such a guise. But it is also clear from the major *ginan*s attributed to him that he employed, to some extent, a Sufic devotional idiom and *tazkira*, or hagiographical accounts of the *pir*s and imams and Satpanthi rituals, in his poetic compositions. In fact only a very close reading of the long texts shows that the style and language used are more consonant with the characteristically Ismaili mode of invoking the imams and the *pir*s than with the customary Sufi mode of avowing a spiritual master. Nur Muhammad Shah also criticised the orthodox groups for their alleged incapacity to comprehend the esoteric teachings of the Shia Satpanth. Moreover some of the works attributed to him are composed in Gujari, a local language, the use of which (as the author himself observed) was not approved by certain orthodox Muslims.[29]

The Development of the Imamshahi Sect, c.1533–c.1700 and the Question of Patronage

Here it is appropriate to move forward to consider the later broad development of the Imamshahi Satpanthis, concentrating first on the period that runs from the death of Nur Muhammad Shah (c.1533) to the end of the seventeenth century. It must, however, be stressed that what is given here very much represents research in progress.

The fairly scanty evidence available for this rather shadowy early period of Satpanthi history suggests that though the personal devotion of the Kanbi (Patidar) followers to the figure of Imam Shah and his preaching gradually increased, his leading *sayyid* descendants continued to acknowledge the religious authority of the Nizari imams. They also probably continued to forward the imams' traditional tithes (*dasond*) through local Nizari agents, such

[28] See W. Ivanow (ed.), *Imam Mustansir Billah's Pandiyat-I Jawanmardi* (Leiden: The Ismaili Society Series A No. 6, 1953).

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[29] See the manuscript text of his *ginan* entitled 'Sataveni ji vel', canto 169. Nur Muhammad Shah claims that he was accused of writing a religious text in Hindavi, which was disapproved of by others in the city.

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as the neighbouring Kadiwala *sayyid*s (who were connected to Imam Shah through the marriage of his daughter to Pir Mashaikh, one of the sons of his brother Rahimtullah).[30] At the same time, central authority and cohesion within the community at Pirana began to be gradually affected by property disputes and rivalries between the three main lines of *sayyid* descendants of Nur Muhammad Shah, focusing on the control of *dargah* properties. However, such disputes do not appear to have impeded the considerable expansion in the number of Satpanthi followers that seems to have taken place during this period across Gujarat and beyond, from Khandesh and Burhanpur to Kathiawar and Kacch—initiated often by the missionary efforts of the *sayyid*s themselves. Indeed, protected by their comprehensive and ingenious practice of *taqiyya*, the Satpanthi leaders and their followers for long managed to remain unscathed by the growing forces of Sunni orthodoxy as marshalled under the Mughals—at least until the last two decades of the seventeenth century when (as we shall see), betrayed to these forces almost from within, the Imamshahi Satpanthis were subjected to an enforced programme of widespread 'Sunni Islamisation'.[31]

At present the scope of our research only really allows us to expand usefully on two of these various themes, namely the *sayyid*s' disputes and the issue of community authority on the one hand, and what can be referred to as the final Islamisation process on the other.

As regards authority, it appears that of the three surviving sons of Nur Muhammad Shah the youngest, named Sayyid Khan, was generally accepted as his father's spiritual successor,[32] and that his authority continued to be vested in his descendants (the Sayyidkhani *sayyid*s) at least until the second half of the seventeenth century. How far the Sayyidkhanis were formally recognised as *pir*s though is hard to say, albeit that some evidence to that effect can be found in several surviving genealogies and a few notable *ginan*s. Incidentally, the fact that these *ginan*s continued to be imbued with veiled devotional sentiments for the Nizari imams is part of the evidence for supposing that some of the Pirana leaders continued to accept the authority of the Nizari mission, even though their direct or personal links with the distant imams appear to have decreased. Some fresh evidence has also emerged which suggests that a number of Sayyidkhani leaders initially joined

[30] See the account of Rahimtullah in Herati, *Tasnifat*, pp.54, 60–1.

[31] The term 'Islamisation'—which can be misleading—refers here to the realignment of religious beliefs and practices on the 'legalist' Sunni model. Sunnis, being the majority, claim to represent orthodox Islam.

[32] Apparently two other sons had died earlier leaving only some minor descendants.

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the Qadiri Sufi order as their *taqiyya* and that over the years their descendants stuck with the new affiliation.[33]

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Also, though the Sayyidkhanis certainly held a central position in the Satpanthi community for most of this period, there are signs that their authority was beginning to be challenged by the descendants of the two other surviving sons of Nur Muhammad Shah, i.e. the so-called Jalalshahi *sayyid*s descended from his eldest son Shihabuddin, and the Nurshahi *sayyid*s descended from his third son Mustafa Shah. For example, one source reports that Sayyid Khan himself felt obliged to divide up equally the lands around the shrine of Imam Shah (in which his wife and his son Nur Muhammad Shah were buried) amongst his brothers and their descendants, with the sons of Mustafa Shah (the Nurshahis) getting the left side of the shrine, the Sayyidkhanis the right side, and the sons of Shihabuddin (being from the eldest line) the main shrine area itself.[34] If true, this allocation may also help to explain the subsequent rise to power of the Jalalshahis as the *sajjada nishin*s (caretakers) of the shrine. After the death of Sayyid Khan in 1572, the political situation in Gujarat changed. The independent rulers of Gujarat were brought within the Mughal imperium. During this period a number of Sufis left Gujarat—including the aforementioned descendant of Sayyid Khan.

Rather more explicit evidence that the Sayyidkhani's position was far from secure is that a pitched battle was reported to have taken place in the early seventeenth century between the followers of the grandson of Sayyid Khan and the supporters of Nur Muhammad Shah over the former's right to raise a large tomb over the graves of his forefathers. In the event—though the Nurshahis were defeated—both sides eventually asserted their right to construct such edifices within the compound of the main *dargah* (which survive in poor condition even today).

But what looks like a more significant and long-term challenge to the Sayyidkhanis took place a little later in 1664, when Ashraf Shah from the Jalalshahi line was formally entrusted by the Mughal authorities with the care of the shrine of Imam Shah, and given control over the revenues of the surrounding lands needed for its upkeep.[35] Though the background details are not known, it appears that Ashraf Shah had succeeded in getting the *dargah*

[33] It appears that Sayyid Khan wrote a *ginan* in which the name of a Qadiri Sufi appears. See Muhammad K. Burhanpuri, *Tarikhe Burhanpur* (Delhi, 1899), pp.148–53.

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[34] Khaki, *Moti Satya Veni*, p.41.

[35] *Ibid.*, pp.44–8.

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registered at the Mughal court under his name. It would also appear he had taken advantage of the extended absence from Pirana of the Sayyidkhani leader Pir Muhammad Shahi Dula (died c.1659) who had moved to Burhanpur,[36] which was developing into an urban centre of intellectuals. In Burhanpur Muhammad Shahi Dula befriended the local ruler[37] and joined the Qadiri Sufi order. He is said to have been a very learned person,[38] and is renowned as the composer of the famous *ginan* 'Bujh Niranjan' in Hindustani. Locals were attracted to his preaching. Thus an independent branch of Sayyidkhanis came into existence.[39]

Ashraf Shah prised control of the Pirana shrine from the inexperienced son of Muhammad Shahi Dula. Since there is no mention in legal documents of the Mughal court of any arrangements regarding the property claims of either the Sayyidkhanis or the Nurshahis, this event probably marks the real beginning of the endless and bitter property disputes that subsequently divided the Imamshahi *sayyid*s, and the gradual transfer of central power from the Sayidkhanis to the Jalalshahis. In another sense too the Mughal sources suggest that the government authorities had apparently concluded that Imam Shah's *dargah* was in effect just another Sufi shrine), and not the clandestine centre of a neo-Nizari mission.[40] If so, it was perhaps the most significant demonstration of the effectiveness of traditional Satpanthi *taqiyya*. However the effectiveness of that cover was not to last much longer.

As we have seen, Satpanthi *taqiyya* had served the Imamshahi Satpanthis and other Nizaris well for most of this early period. But by the late seventeenth century time was beginning to run out for the many 'syncretic' and secret (*gupti*) communities of India as the strict religious policies of the emperor Aurangzeb's government began to be applied in Gujarat, first against the Bohoras and later, around 1680, against the Satpanthi Imamshahis themselves.[41]

Traditional sources ascribe the betrayal of the Satpanthis to a renegade leader known as Pir Mashaikh II (born c.1650).[42] Descended from Imam Shah's daughter, and a member of the Kadiwala *sayyid*s, Mashaikh II is said to have

[36] Muhammad Shahi Dula had left only a minor son in Pirana.
[37] Ivanow, 'The Sect of Imam Shah in Gujarat', p. 49.
[38] R.V. Russell (ed.), *Gazetteer of Nimar District*, Vol. A (Allahabad, 1908), p.63
[39] See Burhanpuri, *Tarikhe Burhanpur*. Some material also exists in the Marathi language.
[40] Khaki, *Moti Satya Veni*, pp.44–8.
[41] Aurangzeb wanted these sects to convert to Sunni Islam.
[42] M.N. Roohkash, *Momin Komno Itihas* (Bombay, 1936), p.143.

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quarrelled with his Nizari relatives, joined the Chishti Sufi order, and gone on to disclose the secret beliefs and practices of his former co-religionists to his new Sunni patrons and later perhaps to advisers of Aurangzeb. At any rate, punitive action followed swiftly. Sunni preachers visited Satpanthi communities in Gujarat and made them an offer: convert to Sunni Islam or face imprisonment or even death. As for the Satpanthi leaders in Pirana, they were arrested and taken to Ahmedabad for interrogation—even the now-elderly Shahji Mian,[43] who is said to have died or committed suicide on his way to meet a *qadi* (judge). Later on his son Bala Muhammad, and Ashraf Shah from the Jalalshahi line, were sent to Delhi. The former was re-educated; the latter perished.[44] The Satpanthis responded to these hard-line actions in the only way they could. Thousands of them, led by their *patel*s (headmen), rose up against the provincial Mughal authorities, briefly capturing the fort of Bharuch. But eventually they were crushed by the superior Mughal forces with the loss of many lives.[45]

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The consequences of these dramatic events for the little world of Pirana were manifold. By the end of the seventeenth century many Satpanthis, led by the Jalalshahi and Nurshahi *sayyid*s, had converted to Sunni Islam. Henceforward they retained for themselves some of the traditional tithes previously sent to the imams in Iran. By contrast the Sayyidkhanis seem to have drifted more towards Shiism while, like the other lines of *sayyid*s, giving up on the despatch of *dasond* (tithes)—although many of the Sayyidkhani *sayyid*s appear to have joined Sufi orders. And the landscape of Pirana changed too. A large mosque was constructed, and later a Shia *imambara*. However despite all the turmoil, many Satpanthis (especially those who were outwardly Hindu in their caste affiliation) continued to be faithful followers of Imam Shah, and kept up (like the Nizari Satpanthis) traditional rituals such as the *ghat-pat* or holy water ceremony (reciting the names of Ismaili imams in their prayers and remaining expectant of the arrival of the Nikalank avatar in India)—except that such traditionalists were forced by the *sayyid*s to stop having Hindu priests officiate at their marriages, and to bury, rather than cremate, their dead.

The Development of the Pirana Satpanth c.1700–1900

In approaching this long period, it is useful to distinguish three main processes: firstly, that by which the Jalalshahi *sayyid*s consolidated their control over the

[43] Shahji Mian was the successor to Shahi Dula from the Sayyidkhani line.
[44] See Khaki, *Moti Satya Veni*, p.48.
[45] Ivanow, 'The Sect of Imam Shah in Gujarat', p.52.

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Imam Shah *dargah* around the middle of the eighteenth century; secondly, that by which, in the late eighteenth century, the Jalalshahi *sayyid*s and their *kaka* allies severed most of their remaining links with the Nizari Ismailis, and converted the old Satpanth into a separate sect mainly based on tomb worship and devotion to the semi-deified figure of Imam Shah; and lastly, the process by which this sect formation led to the eventual strengthening of the position of the Satpanthi Patidars and other caste followers.

Though clearly weakened and disoriented like the rest of the Satpanthis by Aurangzeb's policies of enforced Islamisation, the Jalalshahi *sayyid*s, now more outwardly Sunni, continued to extend their legal hold over the central *dargah* during the eighteenth century. The crucial moment in this transition came around 1750 when their leader, Sayyid Abbasali, secured the Mughal government's consent to the formal registration of the Pirana property in his own name as *sajjada nishin* (caretaker).[46] It appears that the Mughals also gave an allowance for the upkeep of the *dargah* (which continued to be paid even by later rulers including the British).[47]

In support of their title, the Jalalshahis were also successful in depriving their main rivals, the Sayyidkhanis, of any share in the management of the *dargah* or the dues collected from its devotees, or indeed of any right to burial within the precincts of the *dargah* itself.[48] According to some reports they took these steps because they doubted the genuineness of the Jalalshahi's claim to have descended from Bala Muhammad Shah via the Sayyidkhani line. Be that as it may, the task was certainly made easier by growing divisions amongst the traditional Kanbis (Patidars) and other followers of the Sayyidkhanis, some of whom—the so-called Panchia and Satiya sub-sects—at various stages withdrew their support from the main line of Sayyidkhani *sayyid*s, leaving the latter's following limited to a single main group known as the Athiyas.[49] To be sure, the Sayyidkhanis put up a strong legal fight against their exclusion. And for a while, in the late eighteenth century, they secured a temporary truce through a

[46] Khaki, *Moti Satya Veni*, p.45.
[47] See Records of the IOLR, Boards Collections, British Library, F/4/1901, No. 80523.
[48] Tarachand, 'Pirana Vise', p.276.
[49] According to tradition, the fourfold division into 'main branch', Panchiya, Satiya and Athiya initially resulted from choices made by the Patidar disciples of Imam Shah regarding the *sayyid*'s succession. It is believed that among the twenty groups of Kanbis (Patidars), five (*panch*) chose Bibi Raji Tahira, the wife of Shahji Mian. They were subsequently called 'Panchiyas'. Seven of these groups remained faithful to Pir Bala Muhammad, Shahji Mian's youngest son and are known as 'Satiyas'. Eventually, eight groups followed the latter's other descendant, Badruddin Baqirali, giving birth to the 'Athiya' branch. Four distinct shrines represent each at Pirana.

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marriage alliance between the Sayyidkhani leader Pir Sharif and the daughter of a Jalalshahi *sayyid*. But in the long run they were unable to recover their former position of authority within the *dargah*, and gradually set up various centres outside Pirana.[50] When in the 1830s they were vanquished in a court case begun under the Marathas, the Sayyidkhanis finally accepted that the cause was lost,[51] and started constructing their own separate shrine outside the main walls of the Pirana enclosure.

The second major historical development that took place during the late eighteenth century was the conversion of the Pirana Satpanth into a more autonomous cult totally focused on devotion to the *dargah* and the semi-deified figure of Imam Shah. This too was very likely connected with the Jalalshahi *sayyid*s' consolidation of power, as just outlined. Having secured their legal hold over the *dargah* and its income, they now felt the need to address certain wider questions of faith and authority within the Satpanth, especially since they had, by this time, themselves become Sunnis and ceased to forward their followers' dues to the Nizari imams.

But what exactly was the position of Imam Shah, and to a lesser extent Nur Muhammad Shah, now that the Nizari imams were largely out of the picture? Although it is probable that such questions had been debated earlier, the scanty available evidence suggests that it was the Jalalshahi *sayyid* Bara Mian who, towards the end of the eighteenth century, first seriously tackled these issues—partly through proclamations addressed to his followers and fellow *sayyid*s, and partly by introducing far-reaching reforms to the functioning and the structure of the Satpanth itself. Specifically Bara Mian proclaimed that it had become necessary to accept the fact 'that the *pir* and the Imam are to remain hidden', and that all authority was now vested in the figure of Imam Shah.[52] These slightly cryptic utterances seemed to mean that there was no longer any need to follow the living Imam in Iran—that is to say the Imam of the Nizaris; and coincidentally it appears that claims that the Nizari Imam would be revealed in Imam Shah's descendants were added at this point to some of the *ginan*s of Imam Shah—for example 'Cetamani'.[53] Yet it is not clear whether Bara Mian's moves actually resulted in any immediate changes to the basic *ginan* and ritual texts in which the names of the Nizari imams were regularly recited, or whether the exact theological positions of Imam Shah and Nur

[50] Tarachand, 'Pirana Vise', pp.272–80, mentions several centres.
[51] *Ibid.*, p.271.
[52] Kakhi, *Moti Satya Veni*, p.51.
[53] *Ibid.*, p.133.

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Muhammad Shah were then redefined in Islamic and Hindu terms. Probably such changes came later. What essentially mattered to the *sayyid*s and perhaps to some of their followers was that ultimate spiritual authority no longer resided in the Shia Nizari Imam but in the figure of Imam Shah only.

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In fact it appears that Bara Mian was less interested in theology than in introducing organisational changes into the functioning of the Satpanth, such as would make the Pirana *dargah*, outwardly at least, more like a Sufi shrine. Thus the *urs* or death anniversary of Imam Shah was transformed into a special occasion to be celebrated with great pomp and piety, and the Sufi practice of *langar* (the free distribution of cooked food to people visiting the shrine) was introduced.[54] At the same time, wider changes to the structure and financing of the sect were effected, notably by making the *kaka*s more accountable to the *sayyid*s for the collection of the followers' dues and more clearly defining the scale and system of distribution for the dues collected. In addition outside Pirana itself, various smaller Satpanthi centres were established in areas such as Kacch, Petlad and Kanam—places associated with notable early disciples of Imam Shah.[55]

It seems, too, that the original shrine was given a new shape. An eighteenth-century British visitor, James Forbes, noted in his diary that the mausoleum at Pirana, adorned with white marble, rows of false pearls and wreathes of flowers, looked costly. He also noted: 'The tracery of the windows is extremely neat, and filled with stained glass from Europe, in the manner of our cathedrals'.[56] The overall effects of all these changes was, as we would now say, to raise the profile of the Pirana *dargah* so as to enhance its position as the sacred centre for a wide network of followers and pilgrims scattered across Gujarat. And indeed, with every passing year, pilgrims were visiting the *dargah* in ever greater numbers—so much so that a number of guest houses (*musafar khana*s) had to be built to accommodate them.

On the face of it, these reforms were successful. But soon after the death of Bara Mian at the end of the eighteenth century, a struggle for power between various *kaka*s, *sayyid*s and their Patidar followers began. A story told to Henry Briggs, who visited Pirana in the 1840s, has it that after the death of the chief *kaka*, Nathu, evidently a mild and good administrator, a dispute arose between his overbearing successor, Kaka Shamji, and the

[54] *Ibid.*, p.45.
[55] Contractor, *Pirana Satpanth*, pp.146–50.
[56] James Forbes, *Oriental Memoirs*, Vol.III (London: T. Bensley, 1813), pp.150–61.

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*sayyid*s, over Shamji's discontinuation of funds claimed by them.[57] Eventually the *sayyid*s took Kaka Shamji to the provincial Maratha court and secured a decree in their favour. But after that the Marathas compelled many Patidars to leave Pirana, perhaps fearing an uprising. Later, more cases over control of the funds were fought out in the British courts.[58] The effect of all this was to raise the status of the remaining Patidars and other caste followers upon whose devotion and donations, according to Briggs, the Satpanth establishment increasingly depended. Indeed by mid century these landholders had begun to emerge as a third force in the community's affairs, alongside the more traditional *sayyid*s and *kaka*s. Further along, the Patidars would come to the attention of emerging Hindu reformist bodies such as the Swami Narayan movement and, later, the Arya Samaj.[59]

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Re-Orientations (1900–2004)

A Quest for Identity

As a result of colonial ideologies and polices new religious boundaries were defined. Faced with repeated demonstrations of claims to British superiority, upper-caste Hindus began a painful quest for identity. Considering Christianity and Islam as threats, they endeavoured to prove the existence of one single and superior Indian religion, called by some 'Sanatan Dharma' ('the Eternal Religion') and by others 'Arya Dharma' or 'Hindu Dharma'. To put it another way, 'normative' and 'orthodox' forms of religion were starting to replace local traditions, generating painful tensions among communities which had retained 'liminal' or 'syncretic' beliefs and practices.[60] With respect to the Imamshahis, the Arya Samaj had only a marginal impact, but the later Sanatan Dharm movement attracted into its orbit many Satpanthi followers.[61] Meanwhile the Aga Khan was trying to re-organise his scattered community, and encouraged his followers to give up *taqiyya*. No longer facing persecution, the Nizari Ismailis were invited to re-evaluate their

[57] Henry G. Briggs, *The Cities of Gujarashtra: Their Topography and History Illustrated* (Bombay: Times Press, 1849), pp.310–16.

[58] Records of the IOLR, Boards Collections, British Library, F/4/1901, No. 80523.

[59] Oral testimony collected in 1999.

[60] Dominique-Sila Khan, *Crossing the Threshold: Understanding Religious Identities in South India* (London: I.B. Tauris & The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2004), pp.69–94.

[61] Although both the Arya Samajis and the Sanatanis refer to their religion as 'Sanatan Dharma', each defines it in strongly antagonistic ways. The ultimate success of the Sanatanis is due to their acceptance of image worship and a greater respect for the caste system. See Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

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identity and openly register themselves as Shia. In the event most Imamshahis declined to recognise Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III, as their Imam; however a number of Indian Nizaris chose to embrace other Muslim and non-Muslim traditions.

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At the same time the evolution of the Imamshahi sect cannot be properly understood without keeping in mind that about three-fourths of its members belonged to the agricultural Patidar community. During the early British period they had described themselves as 'Guptis', concealing their true religious affiliation under a Hindu guise. According to tradition the head of the converted community, the *kaka* (who also acted as the caretaker of the main shrine at Pirana), had to be a Kacchi Karwa Patidar. A new awareness, born of economic progress and education, encouraged the Satpanthi Patidars to seek a rapprochement with their caste fellows belonging to other Hindu religious traditions. Distancing themselves from the *sayyid*s and from the traditional 'Guptis', they expressed a wish to be recognised as 'genuine' Hindus. Between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, many Patidars joined the ranks of the Ramanandis, the disciples of Swami Narayan, the Arya Samajis or the Sanatanis. A few others, convinced that the Aga Khan was indeed the promised 'Nikalank avatar', gravitated to the broader Nizari Khoja community.[62]

Early Twentieth-Century Reforms

Realising that as a result of these developments the number of Satpanthi Imamshahis was dwindling, a prominent Jalalshahi *sayyid*, Ahmad Ali Khaki, who claimed to be the legitimate *sajjada nishin* of the Pirana shrine, oversaw a series of reforms aimed at rescuing the endangered Satpanth. First, well aware that the majority of his *murid*s were Patidars who increasingly identified themselves with their Hindu caste fellows, Khaki published a number of books in which he attempted to prove the equivalence of the Vedic and Quranic traditions. The ritual text recited during the *ghat-pat* ceremony was given a new title, 'Yagna Vidhi', and the editor added a series of footnotes to translate Muslim idioms and concepts into Indic terms. For instance, Imam Ali and his Shia successors were equated to Vishnu-Narayan while the Quran was

[62] The Aga Khans and their followers were aware of the historical roots of the Imamshahi tradition. In 1905 Mukhi Devraj was sent to Pirana to collect manuscripts of *ginan*s as a part of his efforts to publish the ritual and literary heritage of the Nizaris. His collection (printed from 1904 onward) was to be regarded as canonical by the community. See Christopher Shackle and Zawahir Moir, *Ismaili Hymns from South Asia—An Introduction to the Ginans* (London: SOAS, 1992), pp.16–17.

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identified with the Vedas.[63] Interestingly, a photograph taken during the period and printed in a few subsequent publications shows Khaki sitting with the Vedic scriptures in front of him. In this way the *sayyid*, who had been actively involved in a controversy with the Arya Samaj, was able to counteract the accusations of the Hindu reformers.[64]

Second, Khaki's activities resulted in the Satpanth being recognised in 1932 as a Vedic tradition by the Hindu Mahasabha, then led by B.S. Moonje.[65] The Mahasabha's declaration allowed Satpanthi Patidars to maintain their syncretic 'Gupti' pose without others questioning their religious identity. Whether Khaki's publications reflected the customary *taqiyya* to protect his community, or the will to reassert the encompassing and universal nature of the Satpanth, is by no means clear. Be that as it may, the *sayyid*'s literary activities represented a turning point in the history of the Imamshahis.

Literary Activities... turning point. Very Important Point

The Role of the Arya Samaj

Now let us turn our attention to Ahmad Ali Khaki's opponents. At the beginning of the twentieth century the community's most dangerous adversary was someone from within. Narayan Ramji Limbani, later known as 'Contractor', a Kacchi Patidar, had given up the Satpanth to become a staunch Arya Samaji. After his initiation into the Arya Samaj he managed to persuade a number of others of his co-religionists to follow suit.

By the 1900s many Kacchi Patidars had migrated to Bombay and Karachi seeking employment. In their new environment they faced intense scrutiny from upper-caste Hindus who were shocked by their religious beliefs and practices. Contractor, in particular, found his professional skills praised but his beliefs laughed at.[66] Deeply hurt, but also disconcerted by this show of prejudice, Contractor in 1908 submitted himself to the ritual of *suddhi*

[63] The parallel is not new. In fact, a similar 'strategy' has been used by the mainstream Nizari preachers in the text of the *ginan*s themselves. What is new here is the direction in which the similes are systematically made: from Islamic into Hindu terminology and not the reverse.

[64] During the same period similar efforts were made by the Gupti Satpanthis of Khandesh (present-day Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra).

[65] An article was published in August 1931 in the *Times of India* (p.13) entitled 'Hindu Maha Sabha and Satpanthis'. A tract reproducting parts of it in English and Gujarati was distributed in Bhavnagar and elsewhere at that time.

[66] The general feeling was that the Satpanthi Patidars had unusual and 'base' customs: they were neither Hindus nor Muslims, they buried their dead and recited Muslim prayers while simultaneously keeping a number of Hindu traditions.

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(purification)[67] and became a member of the Arya Samaj. From that moment he became an inveterate critic of the Satpanth, constantly 'exposing' its supposed 'evils'. In his major work *Pirana Satpanth ni Pol Ane Satya no Prakash* (1926), still considered an important document on the history of the Imamshahis, Contractor, besides telling the story of his own life and activities, argued with reference to a carefully chosen set of Satpanthi *ginan*s that under the cover of the 'Vedic Dharma' a purely Muslim tradition had been imposed on innocent and ignorant devotees. Actually, this was not an entirely new argument because Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj, had asserted much the same thing 50 years earlier.[68] However, because it spoke directly to the Satpanthi Imamshahis, Contractor's propaganda had an instant impact. Soon a good many Patidars had joined the ranks of the Arya Samaj. That there were not more defections was due to Ahmad Ali Khaki.

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In 1925 Khaki published a booklet titled *Narayan Ramji Pradidhvani* (*Reply to Narayan Ramji*), in which he responded to the Arya Samaj's attacks. In keeping with the *sayyid*'s characteristic style, it opened with a quotation from the Sanskrit *Manusmrti* and continued with numerous references to the Vedas. The author explained that the Quran did not in any way contradict these Brahminical scriptures, and that the great Sufi saints, such as Rumi, had followed exactly the same path to salvation as the Hindu saints. He also insisted that the Satpanth was eternal (*anadi)* and could not have started only at the time of Imam Shah. In this way, inspired by the claim to universality which is typical of the Nizari religion, Khaki sought to portray the Satpanth in the same light as the Hindu reformers who were elaborating the concept of a 'Sanatan' tradition. Khaki also alleged that Contractor possessed only limited knowledge of the tradition and that he had misrepresented Satpanthi beliefs and rituals.

The *kaka* of Pirana supported Khaki's efforts and, following step by step the machinations of Contractor and his Arya Samaj friends, strove to bring the erstwhile Imamshahis back to the fold.

The Sanatan Dharm Movement

Meanwhile, though, another conflict had arisen among the Patidar Hindu reformers. In 1923 a long-time friend of Contractor, Ratansi Khimji Khetani,

[67] For the *suddhi* or purification ritual see Catherine Clémentin-Ojha, 'La *Suddhi* de l'Arya Samaj ou l'Invention d'un Rituel de (Re)conversion à l'Hindouisme', in *Archives de Science Sociale des Religions*, No.87 (July–Sept. 1994), pp.99–114.

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[68] See Jones, *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century Punjab*. Dayanand Saraswati wrote a book entitled *Satyarth Prakash* in which he expounded his main ideas.

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had joined the Arya Samaj. Subsequently he came under the influence of Swami Audharam, the head of an ashram located near Bhuj, who was spreading the message of Sanatan Dharma in Kacch. Contrary to Arya Samaj practice, the Sanatanis cleaved to Brahminical orthodoxy and tolerated image worship.[69] Ratansi was convinced that the Sanatan Dharm movement was the only way that, in the short term, the thousands of Satpanthis who had deserted Hinduism could be reclaimed. At Virani, Contractor's natal village in Kacch, the old Satpanthi shrine or *khana* had been converted into an Arya Samaj shrine, but in 1929, as the Sanatan Dharm movement gained ground, it was transformed once again, this time into a temple dedicated to Lakshminarayan.[70] Now Ratansi began to build more temples to the same deity in other villages, accelerating the decline of the Arya Samaj. Realising that he was losing the battle, in the late 1930s Contractor sought a rapprochement with the Sanatanis through the *suddhi* movement.[71]

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Towards a Legal Definition of the Satpanth

Yet another crisis during this period involved a dispute over the administration of the Pirana shrine and the shares to be given to the *sayyid*s. A court case, filed in 1932, saw the *kaka* (supporting the *sayyid*s) opposed by a group of Patidars. Here was an opportunity to define, at the legal level, the religion of those who claimed Imam Shah as the founder and Pirana as the sacred place, yet faced with the extreme complexity and ambiguity of the case lawyers and judges were puzzled. What kind of religion did the Satpanth represent? Was it a Hindu or a Muslim sect? Could the *sayyid*s be called Satpanthis if they claimed to be orthodox Sunnis? Were the disciples real Hindus?[72]

[69] Kenneth W. Jones, 'Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India', in *The New Cambridge History of India*, Vol.III-1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.108.

[70] As a majority of the founders and organisers of the Sanatan movement were Vaishnavas, this form of worship was preferred. Later on, more and more temples of this kind were built along the same lines. We are grateful to Catherine Clémentin-Ojha for this valuable information.

[71] It may be noted that, at that time, both reformist organisations were coming closer within the Hindu Mahasabha. See Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics 1925 to the 1990s* (Delhi: Viking, 1996), pp.19–22. Ahmad Ali Khaki's crusade was continued by his son, Shamsuddin Bawa, who as well as reprinting and editing his father's tracts, became involved in politics. He was supported in these endeavours by his disciple Ravji Kanji, a Kacchi Patidar, who wrote numerous booklets under the curious *nom de plume* 'Anami Antaratma' ('anonymous inner soul'). Kanji fought to preserve what he believed to be the true nature and identity of the Satpanth. Interestingly, he did not perceive the Imamshahi tradition as an offshoot of the Nizari Ismaili tradition but as an independent movement created in order to bridge the gulf between Hinduism and Islam and put an end to the caste system.

[72] Taking advantage of the situation Contractor published a pamphlet in which he asked four questions of the *kaka*. He promised, if the *kaka* could prove that his *panth* was Hindu, to hand over to him a large sum of money. For the legal definition of the religion of the Nizari Ismaili Khojas, see Amrita Shodhan, *A Question*

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Nonetheless the Pirana shrine attained a legal existence soon after this proceeding, when it was registered, in 1939, as the 'Bawa Imamshah Rauza Trust'. Later it was re-registered under the 1950 Bombay Public Trust Act as a 'cosmopolitan' charitable institution[73]—a term which would have important repercussions for the future of the sect.

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Kaka Karsan Das and His Reforms

About this time another powerful figure emerged: Karsan Das, born in 1932 in Kotra village in Kacch. Ambitious and clever, although poorly educated, Das quickly became a favourite with his *murshid* Pirzada Shamsuddin Bawa who encouraged him to leave Kacch and settle near Pirana. There he began his career as a social activist and religious reformer. In 1986, after Kaka Savji's sudden death, he became *gaddivala kaka* (head caretaker) of Pirana. This was a time of rapid and notable change. Recently the Patidar community had been recognised as belonging to the high-status Kshatriya *varna*. In the mid 1980s it shifted its political allegiance from the Congress—which had the reputation of being a party sympathetic to Muslims and untouchables—to the Right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), founded in 1980 to replace the Jana Sangh.[74]

The ideology of Hindutva disseminated by the BJP made the identity crisis felt by many Kacchi Patidars—the problem which Contractor had tried to solve—more acute. With their outward Hindu identity, the Sapanthi 'Guptis' became an easy target for Sangh Parivar organisations (in particular the Vishwa Hindu Parishad). Meanwhile the Lakshminarayan (Sanatan) movement continued to make inroads. Giving up the old *khana*s (shrines), the Sanatanis started to build their own temples enshrining images of Vishnu and Lakshmi.

According to his *pir*, Sayyid Shamsuddin Bawa, it was in order to check this process and to rescue the endangered Satpanth that the new *kaka* of Pirana chose to come to terms with the enemy. Shamsuddin claims that this was, initially at least, a form of *taqiyya*. He suggests that, by falling back on Khaki's interpretation of the sect and the acceptance of its tradition as a 'Vedic' one by the Hindu Mahasabha, Karsan Das was able to prove the original 'Hindu' character of his sect. During the Sant Sammelan organised in 1996 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Das' activity as the *gaddipati* (head of the seat) of Pirana, the Persian title '*kaka*' was dropped, as was his Muslim name (Pir Karim).

of Community: Religious Groups and Colonial Law (Calcutta: Samya, 2001), pp.1–116. Shodhan's study is of exceptional importance as it stresses the connection between religious affiliation and legal definition.

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[73] Khan and Moir, 'Coexistence and Communalism: The Shrine of Pirana in Gujarat', pp.141–2.

[74] Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*, pp.315–8.

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But to get to this point Karsan Das had had to initiate a series of reforms which went much further than those of Ahmad Ali Khaki. He modified the entire Satpanthi sacred literature, expurgating from it all Islamic references,[75] and did the same with the ritual. The figure of 'Nishkalanki Narayan' (who in the Ismaili idiom had been equated to Imam Ali and the successive imams) was brought into prominence. So was the 'Atharva Veda' (or Athar Veda), one of the 'Gupti' names traditionally given to the Satpanth. As for the Pirana shrine, which looked like any other Sufi *dargah* and obviously could not be demolished, cosmetic changes were made to give it a more 'Hindu' look. The sacred symbol 'Om' was painted on the walls, Imam Shah's room was converted into a *puja khand* (prayer hall), images of the three Sanatani deities, Mahesh (Shiva), Vishnu and Brahma, were painted on the wall of the recess opposite the *qibla* where the *ghat-pat* ceremony is still performed, and the ceiling and walls of the large prayer hall were decorated with paintings representing Vishnu's ten avatars and other gods and goddesses (along with the miracles of Imam Shah).

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It is difficult to judge how far these transformations affected the reforming *kaka* himself. Might it be that in the long run he did really and sincerely choose to adopt a 'Hindu' identity? Karsan Das's replies to our enquiries were always vague and he continuously asserted that the Satpanth was 'non-sectarian', very much like Kabir's and Nanak's movements and the whole *sant parampara* (the religious tradition connected with the non-sectarian saints). Moreover he never denied the presence of Sufi elements in the movement. In front of us his attitude appeared to be very different from the image he showed to the ideologues of Hindutva during the various Sant Sammelans.

One by one in the Satpanthi villages of Kacch new temples were built on this model, near the recently-erected Lakshminarayan shrines. Their outer structure looks traditional, except that both newly-constructed temples we observed bore a red or white flag respectively. But inside, the Sanatani temples contained idols, whereas the Satpanthi Nishkalanki Mandirs—as they are now called—boasted only a canopy meant for the *ghat-pat* ritual, with the images of the three main deities and the 'Om' symbol painted on the wall. The old *khana*s, generally installed in ordinary houses, had been abandoned.

By 1996, ten years after the new *kaka*'s election, the Satpanth had been largely accepted as a purely Hindu sect, and *sayyid*s were no longer allowed to interact

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[75] A similar task had been undertaken earlier in Surat by the local Satpanthi Patidars with the creation of the Akhil Bharatya Satpanth Mandal.

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with the Satpanthi 'Guptis' eager to flaunt their new Hindu identity. At this juncture Khaki's son, who posed as the main *pir* and *sajjada nishin* of Pirana, remained Karsan's *murshid* but went into concealment in Ismaili fashion. His political connections though allowed him to continue his efforts for the survival of the Satpanth as a distinct religious movement. For instance, he helped Karsan Das oppose the so-called 'cremation movement' which was pressuring the Satpanthis to give up burial. Between them they managed to defend this old tradition by renaming it '*samadhi*'—a term given to the burial of Hindu ascetics in the sitting position.[76] Eventually, though, the struggle for the preservation of the 'syncretic' Satpanthi traditions became too much for Shamsuddin Bawa and he decided to await better times by continuing with *taqiyya* and initiating a few faithful Satpanthis who secretly came to see him at his residence in Ahmedabad.

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Recent Developments

In 2004 the sudden death of Karsan Das triggered a fierce battle for the position of *gaddipati* of Pirana. The Patidar Satpanthis selected his nearest disciple Nanak Das. The opposition, mainly led by the *sayyid*s, immediately commenced litigation to have this choice set aside. The case is still going on. However this did not slow the pace of change. The new *kaka* and his Patidar followers have continued Das' work of reform and renewal. The main gate of the shrine, which had had to be kept shut because of its dilapidated condition,[77] was renovated and a statue of the god Ganesh installed in one of the side recesses. Today the exterior aspect of the shrine looks exactly like that of a Hindu temple built in eighteenth-century style.[78]

But another of Karsan's former disciples, Ravji Kanji, now started to question the meaning of Karsan's reforms. Attacking 'reformed' Satpanthis who now dominated his caste, he appealed to them to respect the syncretic nature of the Satpanth which constituted, he opined, its true essence. Coincidentally, the isolated *sayyid*s who had supported another candidate for the position of

[76] According to the ancient Brahminical treatises one had to extinguish one's sacrificial fire (symbol of the householder's life) before becoming an ascetic. Therefore no sacred fire was left for their cremation and they had to be buried. For the same reason, Shudras (service castes) and untouchables could not be cremated. However towards the end of the nineteenth century some low-caste communities, as well as a few ascetics (mainly Vaishnavas) started to cremate their dead.

[77] After Karsan's nomination the entrance was through a rather shabby courtyard leading into a narrow corridor with the following inscription on the wall: 'samadhi java no rasto' ('way to the samadhi'). The use of the word *samadhi* instead or *rauza* or *dargah* is characteristic.

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[78] In North India during the eighteenth century Rajput architecture was heavily influenced by the Mughal style.

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gaddipati brought a series of damaging civil suits against Karsan Das.[79] Through this litigation, and Kanji's public protests, and the subsequent publication in Calcutta of a whole 'counter-literature' written by Khaki, Karsan's opponents attempted to justify the Islamic, but also syncretic, nature of their sect as distinct from Hindu and other Muslim traditions—even as minor branches such as the Athiyas (now actively involved in the court cases), Panchiyas and Satiyas struggle against the odds to preserve what they believe to be the 'original' Satpanthi tradition.

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Conclusion

Has the Imamshahi Satpanth any chance to survive in the present context of North India, and in particular, Gujarat? The main problem lies in the fact that the majority of Satpanthis belong to the Patidar and other so-called 'Hindu' castes. Karsan's 'revolution' is probably irreversible, in the sense that the young generations, as proved by our field inquiries, have already been initiated into his reformed version of the Satpanth and feel happy with a clear-cut, unambiguous, high-caste Hindu identity.

On the other hand, some *sayyid*s, claiming that Imam Shah was an authentic Sunni Suhravardi Sufi, have given up the Satpanth to maintain a purely devotional link with their *pir* and his shrine at Pirana. They now regard themselves as 'orthodox' Sunni Muslims. We also traced in Ahmedabad a community, referred to as 'Nurshahi Momins' (mainly low-caste groups) who have recently embraced Twelver Shiism. For them Imam Shah and his son Sayyid Muhammad Nur Shah were Ithna-ashari (Twelver Shia) saints who, at the beginning of their mission (*tabligh*), chose to give a syncretic form to their religion in order to facilitate conversions—a form they thought no longer useful.

Conflicting identities, associated with vested interests and recent political developments, certainly threaten the very existence of the Imamshahi Sapanth as a distinct sect originated from the Indian acculturated version of Nizari Ismailism. But we should add that the same menace hovers over other 'heterodox' and 'liminal' religious movements. The future will tell whether, in the case of the Imamshahi Satpanthis, rebellion, court cases or simply *taqiyya* will ensure the survival of the tradition. If so it could set an example for other deeper transformations that could strengthen India's secular fabric.

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[79] On this issue and the contents of these cases, see Khan, 'Liminality and Legality: A Contemporary Debate among the Imamshahis of Gujarat', pp.209–32.